

## 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

### *And Sarah laughed*

Genesis 18:1-15 & Romans 5:1-8

Sarah laughed. Of course, she laughed. What she overheard was absurd.

Standing at the entrance to their tent, Sarah eavesdropped on Abraham as he talked with three strangers. These men prophesied, 'about this time next year Sarah your wife will bear a son.' It was ludicrous. He was a hundred and she just ten years younger. Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure and the joy of a new-born baby?' It was the laugh of total disbelief.

Faith – trust in God – is often not only difficult – it can seem totally irrational. It doesn't fit with how we normally see things. Sarah's response was understandable. After all these years, she and Abraham had accepted their bareness. They had resigned themselves to a future without children, and there was no reason at all to expect that it would change now – certainly not at their age. The absurdity of what was being said was laughable.

Their situation was hopeless, and they accepted their hopelessness as normal, and this is where God meets them. Not in their hopefulness but in their hopelessness. Understandably, when this good news is brought to them, they see it as nonsense to be laughed off. But what is God's response? ... Here's the punch line of the story – 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?' 'Is anything impossible for the Lord?' It's not a statement but a question, because what God is offering requires a decision. Abraham and Sarah have to decide how they're going to respond. And only they can make that decision. It's the same for us.

If the answer is, 'Yes, some things are too hard – some things are impossible for God,' then perhaps we're saying God isn't God. We've confined ourselves to a hopeless existence. If, on the other hand, we answer, 'No, nothing is impossible for God – No, nothing is too wonderful for the Lord to do,' then we've not only opened ourselves up in trust to God – we've also embraced a new way of seeing life – life loaded with hope.

To do the impossible! That assertion shatters our normal frames of reference. It breaks us out of the limitations that reason and common-sense place on us. It smashes how we normally think and see things. For me, that's exciting, but it's also scary as questions and doubts quickly creep in. Things won't necessarily turn out how I expect them to. My sensible, pragmatic way of seeing life is thrown out of kilter. It challenges my normal way of perceiving life. What's more, I think it questions how I see God.

For all our affirmations of faith, I think most of us usually join in with Sarah and laugh out of disbelief. Anglicans are, after all, sensible people. We fight back this irrational attack on our way of seeing things. But this story poses a searching question. Have we tamed God? Have we made God into a rather harmless and bland being? Have we bought into a faith that doesn't have any real expectation of God – or at least, who won't disrupt things as they are? Have we created a rather tiny god?

'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' 'Is it impossible?' 'Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?' Is God's power limited to our expectations? The question resounds today. Can Abraham and Sarah finally keep their future closed off to God? Can we?

The question isn't, of course, only for this old couple. It's about how we choose to live. Jesus would come back to this question. He said to the disciples, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for

God all things are possible.’ Faith – trust in God – doesn’t make everything we desire possible. Not everything is promised. What is possible, is that which is promised by God – that which is within God’s purposes. Jesus illustrated this the night before he died. Wrestling with God as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, he asked: ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’ One thing God will not do is to sidestep the reality of suffering and pain. So, we mustn’t use this story as a way of using God as a fairy godparent who grants us every whim and lets us side-step the tough stuff. An outstanding biblical scholar of our time (Walter Brueggemann) commented, ‘Because of the character of God, everything is possible for those who stay through the dark night of barrenness with God. For Abraham and Sarah, there is no simple, painless route to an heir.’

Saint Paul knew what it was to suffer, and when he wrote to the Romans, he was addressing a faith community who certainly knew pain and suffering. He spoke to them of hope. ‘Hope’, he said, ‘does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’ Hope isn’t wishful thinking. Hope contains a very high element of certainty because it’s rooted in God’s faithfulness and promises. Hope is grounded in who God is – God who is love – whose love, as Paul says, ‘has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.’ This is the basis of our hope, and such hope ‘does not disappoint’ because God is who God is, and that’s what provides confidence in facing the future. This is what Abraham and Sarah would learn.

This story ends on a question mark. Will this elderly couple finally accept this utterly absurd promise that contradicted all common sense? As the story develops, we see how they had to learn that with God the impossible is possible – though for them it was a massive struggle. They would doubt and deny – just as we do. We know how the story finally ends. Sarah finally fell pregnant and gave birth to a boy whom they named ‘laughter’ or ‘he laughs’. Sarah declared, ‘God has brought laughter for me; and everyone who hears will laugh with me.’ Her laughter of disbelief was finally turned into the joyful laughter of unexpected fulfilment!

God’s promises are sure, but they are fulfilled in unexpected and untimely ways. We need to decide how we respond to that question, ‘Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?’ ‘Is anything impossible for the Lord?’ Do we choose to be bound by common sense and predictability – all of which make us feel safe? Do we accept our barrenness – whatever forms that may take – as had Abraham and Sarah, and resign ourselves to a life of diminishing possibilities? Or do we embrace a trust in God, knowing that God may do the irrational, the absurd, the impossible, and the wonderful? Do we embrace the Lord who meets us in our hopelessness and transforms it into hopefulness?

*Alister Hendery*  
*St Matthew’s, Hastings – 18.6.2023*